Solution to A Cultural Dilemma: The Strategy of Parody in Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior

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Abstract. The Woman Warrior is the most commonly read yet most controversial one among all the works written by Maxine Hong Kingston. Although it was published as nonfiction and considered as an autobiography by common readers, critics and scholars have held different viewpoints concerning its identity. She labels the book as “memoirs”, but family anecdotes, folktales, myths, historical stories, dreams and memories are mixed all up in the book. Besides, the writing techniques are also different from traditional autobiographies. Taking the social background and the writer’s personal experience into account, the paper analyzes the protagonists, structure and narrative strategy of the book and concludes that The Woman Warrior is in fact a parody of contemporary autobiography. By challenging the static notion of autobiography, Kingston claims her cultural status as an ethnic woman writer in America.

1. Definition of parody

The highly ambiguous term “parody” can be traced back to the Greek word “parodia”, which was first seen in Aristotle’s Poetics and referred to “a narrative poem of moderate length using epic meter and language but with a trivial subject”[1]. The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English defines parody as “a piece of writing, music, acting, etc. that deliberately copies the style of sb/sth in order to be amusing” or “something that is such a bad or unfair example of sth that it seems ridiculous”. And according to American Heritage Dictionary, parody is “a literary or artistic work that imitates the characteristic style of an author or a work for comic effect or ridicule”. The key words of the definitions given by both of the two dictionaries of modern English are “copy”, “imitate”, “amusing” and “ridiculous”, demonstrating a disapproving attitude. Margaret Rose, a leading expert of the theory of parody, suggests in Parody//Meta-fiction that parody is “in its specific form the critical quotation of preformed literary language with comic effect”[2]. But when we analyze the Greek word “parodia” from the etymological point of view, it is composed of a prefix “para”, which means “counter” or “beside”, and the part “odos” meaning “song”. There is no hint that the word includes a sense of “ridicule” or “comic”. Therefore, it seems more accurate to define parody as “a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text” and “repetition with critical distance”[1]. In other words, imitation emphasizes on the similarities to other texts, while parody on the differences. Plus, Hutcheon contends that parody does not necessarily contain comic elements, blaming the “stubborn retention of the characteristic of ridicule or of comic in most definitions of parody”[3]. In fact, with irony as one of its most distinguished element, parody demonstrates a range of pragmatic ethos “from scornful ridicule to reverential homage”[1]. And postmodern theorists continue to see parody as one of the key strategies of postmodern style[4].

Parody can assume many forms. It can be directed at certain texts, personal styles, specific figures and images, language and discourse, or a particular genre, which is categorized as “general parody”. This kind of parody targets at a literary genre with specific writing modes or thematic conventions. Cervantes’ Don Quixote serves as a good example of parody of genres by imitating the chivalric
romance. More examples are provided below: Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, a parody of travel narrative; Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, a parody of traditional novel; Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, a parody of pastoral myth; and Byron’s *Don Juan*, a parody of epic. And likewise, Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* could be viewed as a parody of autobiography, which would be discussed in depth in the following part.

2. Parodying conventional autobiography as a writing strategy

According to Sau-Ling Wong, autobiographies predominate in Chinese-American writing in English and Chinese-American writers “entered into the house of literature through the door of autobiography”[5]. This is perhaps because autobiography is the best form of writing for minorities to articulate their existence, which could help them assimilate into the mainstream society. Amy Ling has concluded that many works written by Chinese Americans, especially those earlier ones, fall into the two following types. The first type is what she calls the “alien observer”[6], referring to writings about their impression of or reaction to their life in the west, which the western readers find amusing to read. The second type is the “tourist guide”[6], which describes and explains Chinese culture and ways of doing things. And some Chinese American autobiographies do belong to the latter type. A good example is Lee Yan Phou’s *When I Was a Boy in China* (1887), with seven of the twelve chapters introducing all aspects of Chinese life to western readers. Similar autobiographies also include Pardee Lowe’s *Father and Glorious Descendant* (1943) and Jade Snow Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945).

*Fifth Chinese Daughter* is the first widely read work of Chinese American literature, which is very surprising because it’s only a personal story about an ordinary Chinese American woman[7]. Although this autobiography was attacked by many American critics, Kingston had mentioned in a letter to Amy Ling that *Fifth Chinese Daughter* was the only Chinese American author she read before she wrote her own book and labeled Jade Snow Wong as “the Mother of Chinese American literature”[6]. It was the first time Kingston saw Chinese American character in a book and it was told from the point of view of a young girl just like herself[8]. She talked about this experience in another interview: “There were such wonderful illustrations of little kids that looked like me, and most importantly, written by a Chinese American woman. So, she gave me this great welcome and send-off, so I continued writing”[9]. Then, it’s reasonable that Kingston adopts the similar writing style as Jade Snow Wong does when writing her first book. Even so, it’s not difficult to tell the difference between *The Woman Warrior* and *Fifth Chinese Daughter*.

Soon after its publication, *The Woman Warrior* become a hit and was given the 1976 National Book Critics Circle Award for nonfiction. Critics have argued heatedly against each other about the problem of the book’s identity — to which genre it belongs to, autobiography or fiction. The book itself is very confusing, for it virtually contains many fictional descriptions while published as nonfiction. It also receives intense criticism from some Asian American viewers, including Frank Chin, who accused Kingston of unfaithfully rewriting Chinese myths and stories while categorizing the book as an autobiography. Chin once said that he would sing high praise of the book if it were published as a novel; now that it came out as autobiography, he wouldn’t believe in it[10]. In her self-defending article “Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers”, Kingston declares that she is “an American writer, who, like other American writers, wants to write the great American novel”[11], but her editor Charles Elliott, caring more about the commercial profit, suggested having the book published as autobiography and she finally agreed[10]. There are also some who see the book as a kind of fictional autobiography or autobiographical novel. For example, Sidonie Smith writes that the five narratives in *The Woman Warrior* are “decidedly five confrontations with the fictions of self-representation and with the autobiographical possibilities embedded in cultural fictions, specifically as they interpenetrate one another in the autobiography a woman would write”[12]. However, quite a number of critics prefer to categorize it as a mixture of styles and genres, just as Patricia Blinde notes, “*The Woman Warrior* is a collage of genres put to work in the remaking of
Chinese folk legends, folk tales, and events and impressions pertaining directly to the author’s own life history. It is at once a novel, an autobiography, a series of essays and poems.”[13]

An autobiography in the traditional sense is always written in the first person, i.e., with “I” as its specific mark, usually begins with an introduction to the autobiographer’s family background and proceeds to narrate his or her life experiences in a chronological order. Characteristically, the narrative is linear and focuses on events that mark the narrator’s self-development from innocence to maturity. What’s more important, readers of autobiography would naturally expect what they read to be true, thinking that the autobiographer is narrating and evaluating his or her life with a serious attitude. It’s obvious that The Woman Warrior does not strictly adhere to all those traditions.

First of all, it goes against the commonly accepted knowledge that autobiography is a “retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality”[14]. The book is comprised of five chapters, but three of them are mainly telling stories about the narrator’s aunts and mother. And one of the two remaining chapters is dedicated to a mythical woman hero, Fa Mu Lan. It’s not until the last chapter that the narrator becomes the protagonist of the narrative. Kingston had once stated clearly in an interview that she was not the narrator in the book: “Oh, that narrator girl. It’s hard for me to call her me, because this is an illusion of writing”[15].

Secondly, the book’s structure is circular rather than linear. Contrary to the chronological narrative of general autobiographies, The Woman Warrior is achronological. That is to say, Kingston does not relate her growth from childhood to adulthood in time order. Each of the five chapters is self-contained, with the narrator’s own experience weaved amid other people’s stories. For example, the book begins with “No Name Woman”, in which Kingston retells the story about her aunt in China who committed adultery and drowned her new-born illegitimate child and herself soon after the delivery. In this chapter, the narrator is an adolescent girl who just begins to menstruate, and the aunt’s story was told by her mother as a warning. In “White Tigers”, after the inspiring story of the warrior woman is finished, the narrative switches to the narrator’s disappointing American life, i.e., the sexist and racial prejudice she has suffered since she was a young girl. In the third chapter featuring the mother’s life in China and in America, entitled “Shaman”, we can find here and there the narrator’s comments on the truth of her mother’s ghost stories. Plus, because as a kid she lives with her mother, the accounts of her mother’s American life are inevitably mingled with Kingston’s childhood life. And the chapter ends with detailed narratives of a recent visit she paid to her mother, in which she is an adult. The following chapter “At the Western Palace” recounts the story of her aunt, Moon Orchid, who came to America from Hong Kong with the intention of winning her husband back but got mad and died in the end. The story is told in the third person without mentioning anything about the narrator herself. The last chapter is the only one chiefly concerned with the autobiographer’s own experience, which deals with the difficulty she had encountered in speaking English when she was growing up. Thence, it’s obvious that each chapter makes a complete story and is not necessarily related to one another chronologically. And the narrator as an adult appears throughout the whole book, commenting on the stories narrated.

Thirdly, the narrative strategy used in The Woman Warrior is entirely different from conventional autobiographies, in which the autobiographer narrates his or her life from the beginning to the end. In The Woman Warrior there is a plurality of voices. The protagonist is in a fluctuating position, being the narratee in some sections, the protagonist-narrator in others, and even the absent “I” when the narrative shifts to third person point of view. The stories are usually first told by the mother, and then retold by the narrator in the book. While retelling these stories, the narrator always challenges her mother’s version and reconstructs them by adding her own interpretation and imagination. Take “No Name Woman” for example. The original story, seen by the family as an unspeakable scandal, was told by her mother to Kingston because she has entered puberty and reached the reproductive maturity. It begins with the mother’s words: “‘You must not tell anyone,’ my mother said, ‘what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well.
We say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she had never been born” [16]. And the mother’s narratives continue without interruption until she ends the story with “Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don’t humiliate us. You wouldn’t like to be forgotten as if you had never been born. The villagers are watchful. [16]” Then, Kingston’s voice enters, commenting on this story and speculating why her aunt committed adultery. In fact, she retells the story in several versions.

The above discussion makes it safe to say that The Woman Warrior is a parody of the conventional autobiography. Kingston is influenced by Jade Snow Wong and follows Wong’s footsteps to begin writing about her own life experience, trying to represent a minority girl’s struggle to reconcile the demands of two cultures. Although her work is published as autobiography, her writing actually challenges the stereotypical image of the Chinese as the model minority that pervades most of the previous autobiographies written by other Chinese American writers. Many former Chinese American autobiographies, such as Jade Snow Wong’s Fifth Chinese Daughter, are typically comprised of four parts — a display of Chinese culture, the image of model minority, individual struggles and the final acceptance and acknowledgment by the mainstream American society. The Woman Warrior questions this kind of writing through violating and parodying the conventional autobiography writing style. It’s not a story about the narrator’s good virtues and her efforts to gain a place in American life and her final triumph in doing so. On the contrary, what can be seen from the book is the narrator’s anger at being trapped between Chinese society’s misogyny and western society’s prejudice against minority groups. Her image in the book is not the model minority’s being polite and modest. Instead, she is disobedient, refusing to do what a Chinese girl is supposed to do — “When I had to wash dishes, I would crack one or two”, “unless I’m happy, I burn the food when I cook” [16], and gets mad when being discriminated against, dreaming of her revenge on the “stupid racists” [16]. She does describe Chinese culture in the book, just as former Chinese American writers do, yet hers is an ironic parody of the Chinatown tour guide mode. In order to satisfy western readers’ curiosity, Pardee Lowe and Jade Snow Wong would dedicate pages to explain how to cook a particular Chinese dish. Similarly, Kingston writes about what her family eats: “My mother has cooked for us: raccoons, skunks, hawks, city pigeons, wild ducks, wild geese, black-skinned bantams, snakes, garden snails, turtles that crawled about the pantry floor and sometimes escaped under refrigerator or stove, catfish that swam in the bathtub” [16]. She also mentions duck’s tongues, monkey’s lips, bear’s claw, and even the process of eating a living monkey’s brain. Undoubtedly, western readers would feel upset when they read about such things and think that Chinese has a disgusting eating habit.

3. Conclusion

When asked in an interview whether her book is autobiography or fiction and about the relationship between fact and fiction, Kingston answers that she is certainly more imaginative than usual biographies for she “play(s) with words and form”, thus defining her book as “autobiography of imaginative people” [17].

To sum up, by substituting the single protagonist with a group of women and violating the narrative structure and discarding the subject matter of conventional autobiographies, The Woman Warrior deliberately parodies Chinese American autobiographies in order to overturn the stereotypical connotation they carries. The book is factually one of the works that depict continuity through change and creative adaptation. Although The Woman Warrior does not end with the protagonist’s winning a place in the American world, she does achieve a kind of success, announced at the end of the last chapter by telling the story of Ts’ai Yen, a poetess who composed a Chinese song with the barbarian reed pipe. What Ts’ai Yen had done is a symbolization of the harmonious coexistence of two different cultures, which means Kingston has finally found a solution to her bicultural dilemma.
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References